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# COACHING TEACHER CANDIDATES: WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE? WHAT DOES IT SOUND LIKE?

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**Abstract:** *Instructional coaching for reflection has traditionally not been part of teacher preparation. In addition, there is limited understanding of developmental coaching relationships within the context of field experience in teacher preparation programs. Reflection has increasingly been recognized as a central element of professional growth during teacher preparation. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the essence of instructional coaching between teacher candidates and an instructional coach as it relates to reflection of practice. Teacher educators would benefit by knowing more about the learning that occurs within the directed conversations between the instructional coach and teacher candidate. This study provided new information regarding the structure, context and content of coaching conversations, in order to better understand factors that facilitated learning that led to more reflective practice. By participating in coaching conversations with an instructional coach, teacher candidates were able to engage in reflective practices that may not have been achieved alone. With the support and guidance of an instructional coach, the teacher candidates were able to identify noteworthy events, analyze these events to gain new understandings about teaching and learning, and set goals based on the newly acquired knowledge. In this article, we will explore a coaching model that has been implemented at a university's teacher preparation program as well as share key learnings, successes, and next steps for developing reflective practitioners.*

Teacher education programs are poised to provide future teachers or teacher candidates explicit and scaffolded experiences throughout their teacher preparation program in pursuance of an inquiry stance. The National Council for the Accreditation of Education Preparation (NCATE, 2002) makes it clear that advancement of reflective practice is an essential component of teacher preparations.

This university utilizes instructional coaching as one method of preparing teacher candidates for the complex work ahead of them. Employing instructional coaches to work with teacher candidates during field experience was a recent addition, implemented during the fall of 2013, to the teacher preparation program.

The goal of this research was to examine the phenomena during coaching conversations. This clarification and understanding can build a foundation for enhanced coaching during teacher preparation. Through a fine-grained analysis of the interactions between instructional coaches and teacher candidates, this study helped to articulate and clarify the structure, content, and context of the coaching conversation. A phenomenological design was used in order to explore the lived experiences of teacher candidates and instructional coaches as they engage in reflective practices during coaching reflective conversations. Creswell asserts "in qualitative inquiry, the intent is to develop an in-depth exploration of the central phenomenon" (2012, p. 203). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the essence of instructional coaching between teacher candidates and an instructional coach as it relates to reflection of practice by answering the following research question: How did the structure, content and context of the conversation build reflective thinking in the teacher candidate?

## Participants

The instructional coach's role is to support teacher candidates' professional growth during their teacher preparation program. Instructional coaches work with teacher candidates during their field experiences. The approach used at this university is based on the construct that the instructional coach is the more knowledgeable other.

The teacher preparation program utilizes a scope and sequence for elementary field experience. Each stage of the field experience builds in complexity. Instructional coaching occurs during the three semesters of

methods coursework prior to the clinical practice or student teaching stage. The stages of the field experience include beginning practicum, intermediate practicum, advanced practicum, final practicum, and finally, the clinical experience. This study examined the coaching conversation that took place during an elementary methods course. The course “Teaching and Assessing Reading in Elementary School” was part of the advanced practicum field experience. This study consisted of 14 teacher candidates and an instructional coach at a metropolitan university in the Midwest. Teacher candidates were undergraduate students who were earning a Bachelor of Science with a major in elementary education. The participants in this study were enrolled in a course entitled “Teaching and Assessing Reading in Elementary School.”

### *Contextualizing the Experience*

The 14 elementary teacher candidates who participated in this study attended a metropolitan university in the Midwest. One instructional coach was also a participant in the study. The instructional coach was employed by the university and worked in the teacher preparation program.

The teacher candidates in this study were working toward earning a Bachelor of Science with a major in elementary education. They were enrolled in a six-credit semester-long reading methods course during the Fall of 2014. The first six weeks of the course were spent at the university campus where they received instruction related to the course content. Following the instruction, the teacher candidates participated in five weeks of field experience at a prearranged elementary school in the metropolitan area. Each teacher candidate was assigned to work with a cooperating teacher in one K-5 classroom during their field experience. The teacher candidates were required to be at this field experience at the same time as their designated class time. This meant they attended the field experience two days a week from 9:00 - 11:45 a.m. Teacher candidates were required to plan and implement ten lessons over the course of the designated field experience. The instructor of the course and the instructional coach were in attendance at the school site for the duration of the field experience.

Each morning teacher candidates were required to check in and provide information regarding the type of lesson (whole group, small group, etc.) they planned to teach that day, as well as the time the lesson would be taught. Teacher candidates were required to submit the lesson plan to a shared Google Docs, 24 hours before the lesson was to be taught. The coach had this to say about the lesson planning process:

“We require that all of our teacher candidates submit the lesson plan to Google Docs at least twenty-four hours before they teach. This gives the instructor and me or both of us an opportunity to look over lesson plans and provide necessary feedback before the lesson is actually implemented. It is also a way to ensure that the teacher candidates are planning the lesson well ahead of time. We know that planning is an important part of the teaching process.”

Google Docs is a web-based office suite and data storage service offered by Google. In this case, it was used for sharing files, which could be edited by all parties that had access to the shared files. Using Google Docs, the instructor, the coach, or both reviewed and provided written feedback of lessons before they were taught.

After the teacher candidates signed in for the day, the course instructor and the instructional coach worked together to identify which candidates they would each observe teaching that day. It was not feasible for the course instructor and instructional coach to observe every lesson taught. Both the course instructor and the instructional coach debriefed with the teacher candidate after the lesson they observed was implemented. For the purpose of this study, only the instructional coach—teacher candidate paradigm was being researched.

The intent was for the instructional coach to hold a coaching conversation following the observation. However, scheduling the conversation had its challenges as the coach had to work within the parameters of the course schedule as well as teacher candidates’ teaching schedules. Occasionally, the coaching conversations were not held on the day that the lesson was taught. Instead, conversations were during the following class session. On several occasions, the instructional coach voiced concern about the delay in holding the coaching conversation. However, this delayed time did not appear to have an adverse effect on these coaching conversations.

Coaching conversations took place at the elementary school site. The precise location of each of these meetings was determined at the moment and was based on convenience and available privacy. On more than one occasion, for example, the library was available for meetings. Some conversations took place in the hallway outside of classrooms where there was a table and two chairs available.

As the instructional coach observed each teacher candidate teaching, she recorded notes using a laptop computer. Throughout the coaching conversation, she referred to these notes. In addition, she recorded notes during the coaching conversation on a document titled Coaching Feedback. Following the coaching conversation, she

would add additional information to the document. The coaching feedback form served as a synopsis and record of their meeting. The expectation was that this document would then be emailed within twenty-four hours to the teacher candidate. During interviews with teacher candidates, several teacher candidates mentioned the value of the coaching document. In fact, Teacher Candidate Amber shared during her interview that she had saved coaching notes from a previous semester when she had an instructional coach. She said, “I would check these forms to see where I was last semester. If I was an eight, was I still doing these things or if I was I five, what did I need to build on.” She described how these notes were a means of reflecting on her professional growth from one semester to the next. She shared that during her current field experience she had looked at these notes and found that the information from the notes to be applicable to her current and future work.

## Findings

### *Launching the Conversation*

The instructional coach initiated the coaching conversation by posing the following question, “On a scale of 1-10, how closely would you rate your lesson in terms of what you planned and what was implemented?” The response to this first question provided an initial glimpse into the teacher candidate’s perception of the lesson that was just taught. In addition, it established a foundation for the conversation by emphasizing the responsibility of the teacher in terms of planning and implementations. This is significant, as this is an area where teacher candidates often struggle. Throughout the conversation the coach addressed the teacher candidates’ role in planning and implementation. Eleven of the fourteen teacher candidates provided a numerical description of their lesson and then, without prompting from the coach, qualified or elaborated on their answer. This teacher candidate response was indicative that the coaching framework was conversational, rather than a ‘pose and respond’ script.

During data analysis the instructional coaches described the critical nature of this initial question. Coach Farrah shared that this initial question “will tell me how they feel about the lesson.” The other three coaches responded in agreement. Through anecdotal stories, all four instructional coaches shared examples about the powerful nature this first question had for them in order to proceed with the coaching conversation, and to enable them to coach teacher candidates in an individualized, responsive manner. One instructional coach then shared a story:

“I once had a teacher candidate give herself a two. Then she started to cry. We had to get her from a two to a ten. I had to decide at that moment how to build her up by really focusing on her strengths before discussing opportunities for growth.”

Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) described this necessity for gaining an understanding of the teacher candidates’ feelings. They maintain that the reflective process requires that negative feelings be removed in order to return to the experience and instead be replaced with helpful feelings. Without these helpful feelings teacher candidates will be inhibited to gain maximum understanding from the experience.

### *Refocusing the Big Blur*

Teaching involves a complex series of dynamic events. This was evident in follow up conversations with coaches when teacher candidates indicated the difficulty in recalling events from the lesson. The data revealed that the coaching conversation assisted the teacher candidates in making sense of the teaching episode. These findings support sociocultural theory of learning. The discussion that took place after the teaching episode provided an opportunity for objectivity and distance that can be necessary for inquiring into one’s own teaching and learning (Serafini, 2002). Teacher Candidate Darby:

“It is good because you have somebody that can dialogue with you back and forth because you can have all these ideas rolling around in your head. I kind of equate it to teacher therapy almost because like you can sit down and talk about what actually happened back and forth with the ideas kind of like, what’s that game where the ball bounces, pong.”

Teacher candidates were learning to understand their actions by thinking about their actions. The instructional coach, the more knowledgeable other (MKO) facilitated this learning by building on and extending mastery of current understandings (Vygotsky, 1978). This facilitation by the instructional coach was individualized and responsive to the teacher candidate resulting in potential for increased cognitive understanding. Through the

conversation the teacher candidate and instructional coach were able to collaboratively reconstruct the lesson in order to interpret the lesson. This enabled them to take an analytical approach to thinking about the lesson. The more knowledgeable other refers to one who has a greater understanding than the learner. The context of the relationship between the more knowledgeable other and the learner is a mechanism for learning. Knowledge about teaching and learning was situational and socially constructed. These experiences allowed teacher candidates to explore more deeply why they acted as they did. This is supported by John Dewey's historical work: "We do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting on experience" (Dewey, 1933).

### *Fostering the Mindset*

Data from the interviews indicated that prior to engaging in the coaching conversation teacher candidates anticipated that coaching would be a negative learning experience. There was a profound misconception that the role of the instructional coach was to tell the teacher candidate what they did wrong and then tell them how to "fix it." This mirrors the Friere's (1970) description of the banking model of learning; a student is a depository and the teacher's role is to deposit information. In this case, it would mean that the instructional coach's job is to transmit the knowledge or tell the candidate what they did "wrong" and then tell them how to fix it in order for learning to occur. This is also an indication of a fixed mindset that views opportunities for improvement as a negative rather than a positive experience from which to learn (Dweck, 2010).

In reality, the nature and framework of the conversation worked to foster a view of teaching and learning as a positive construct. This is significant as it speaks to the theoretical underpinning of the coaching conversations. Teacher Candidate Grace stated:

"They are not trying to tear you down. They are not trying to tell you everything that you did wrong or terrible or anything. They want you to become a better teacher... Like you come in and you are like, I know my lesson didn't go very well and they help you find the strengths and everything.

The data supports that this model of instructional coaching is grounded in a constructive, learner-centered methodology. Additionally, this model of coaching appears to be grounded in elements of feminist pedagogy: a warm, safe caring environment for learning (Nodding, 2013). This construct mirrors how teacher candidates will one day be working with their own students.

### *Noticing the Unnoticed*

Decisions hinge on what is noticed. Adaptive teachers make decisions based first on what they notice and then how they interpret what they notice. This professional noticing can and should be learned through guided practice during teacher preparation. Supporting teacher candidates by enhancing their ability to notice critical aspects of the teaching environment moves teacher candidates toward considering how they may develop new ways of adapting and their role in supporting student learning. It also moves teachers toward a more effective model of instruction. By experiencing this model themselves, teacher candidates come to understand the learner as the center in constructing knowledge rather than the teacher as the deliverer of knowledge.

A favorite example of helping the teacher candidate notice the unknown came from a question generated by Teacher Candidate Lacy after her coach told her that she did a really nice job of managing the class. Lacy asked her if she could give her examples of how she had effectively managed the class. She needed the coach to help her notice what was unknown to her. In a sense she was letting her coach know that she needed a coach to tell her what is was that she was doing well to manage the students, as she may not have been able to see it herself. This was reaffirmed during the follow up interview when Lacy described how her coach helped her to see things that she might 'not catch'. Interview after interview with teacher candidates reaffirmed this theme of noticing the unnoticed.

### *Naming What is Noticed*

As the instructional coaches were reviewing transcription data, one of them noted that throughout the coaching conversations the coach was providing the technical names for events that the teacher candidates were identifying as noteworthy for discussion. The following is an example of a teacher candidate describing a teaching strategy that she implemented and the coach following up by naming this strategy. Teacher Candidate Amber:

"I had a group of three girls and they were getting it. So I had the group split up to work independently a little sooner and then I just had Jay to work with."

The coach responded to this description by naming this instructional strategy, when she said, “That was a good way to **differentiate** for those different needs.”

While the description of the event is noteworthy in and of itself, naming what they notice is also significant. As the teacher candidate would describe elements of their teaching experience the coach would provide the technical term. The act of naming what they notice is also a way of learners taking power over a situation in which they may feel that they have little formal control. The act of naming is a way of making familiar, of translating into common language occurrences, which are perceived to have some meaning (Boud & Walker, 1990, p. 8).

## Discussion

### *Time and Space*

Coaching conversations need to be built into the field experience at all levels, as reflective practices take time to develop. Teacher candidates should be aware that there is a responsibility to engage in the coaching conversation with the instructional coach. Teacher candidates must also understand that the coach’s role is not evaluative. They should understand the structure of the coaching cycle and what their responsibility is to the conversation as well as what the coaches’ responsibility is. This would require time on the part of the teacher candidates, the instructional coaches and the faculty who teach these classes.

Cooperating teachers need to not only be aware of but also understand the role of instructional coaching during field experience. For example, there may be an expectation that the teacher candidate will engage in the coaching conversation at a conveniently scheduled time soon after the lesson has been implemented. Therefore, cooperating teachers may be asked to release teacher candidates from the classroom to hold the coaching conversation. This model will take additional time and effort from the school and university partnership in order to effectively align the expectations of the university with the field placement site.

### *A More Knowledgeable Other*

The coach nurtures teacher candidates’ ability to develop as reflective practitioners. The coach assists the teacher candidate in moving beyond simply describing the experience toward more analytical practices. Reflecting alongside an instructional coach is beneficial to teacher candidates. An instructional coach needs to have a strong content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge, as well as an understanding about working with teacher candidates during their teacher preparation program. Coaches need to be accomplished reflective practitioners themselves. “A good coach can see something special in you that you didn’t know was there and help you to make that something special become a living part of you” (Knight, 2007, p. 15).

For instructional coaches the identification of themes and structure may be useful as they reflect on and make sense of their own role in the coaching conversation. Thus, it might be an exploratory means for facilitating discussion about improving coaching conversations. We may better understand how teacher candidates perceive the coaching experience.

Coaches often leave the conversation wondering what the teacher candidate took away from this conversation. By examining the phenomena of coaching there is clear evidence that teacher candidates viewed instructional coaching as a means to engage in reflective practice. The conversation always ended with the teacher candidate identifying learning goals for their professional improvement. Without this structure and guidance from the more knowledgeable other, these goals could easily become too broad to actually assist teacher candidates. Often times the assistance of the coach or course instructor is necessary in order to identify appropriate and attainable goals that can lead to improvement.

### *Coursework*

Teacher candidates would benefit by gaining a deeper understanding of a more constructive theory of learning. There was an absence of this constructivist stance noted in many of the coaching conversations with teacher candidates. This was evident as they described their initial expectations of the coaching conversations. They anticipated that the coaching conversation would apply a banking style of learning focusing on their deficits. Coursework that includes more instruction during teacher preparation that applies a more constructive learner-centered methodology would support this goal. If there is an expectation that teacher candidates will apply

constructivist instruction when they become practicing teachers, then the teacher preparation program needs to ensure that they are learning from a constructivist approach as well as learning to teach using this theory of learning.

### *Institutional Resources*

This university applies a scope and sequence for elementary field experience over the course of the teacher preparation program. Each stage of the field experience builds in complexity. Additionally, instructional coaching occurs during each stage of the elementary field experiences. The stages of the field experience include beginning practicum, intermediate practicum, advanced practicum, final practicum, and finally, the clinical experience. This study examined the coaching conversation that took place during a course titled Teaching and Assessing Reading in Elementary School that was part of the advanced practicum field experience. It would be advantageous to have support structures and professional development opportunities in place at the university for instructional coaches to continue their own professional growth and development.

### *Scaffolding Experiences*

Intentionally scaffolding experiences throughout teacher preparation better prepares teacher candidates for work in the field. Moreover, teacher candidates participate in a variety of practicum experiences through the teacher preparation program. What this scaffolded support looks like at each stage of the teacher preparation field experience needs to be addressed. Future research needs to identify a trajectory for scaffolding in order to develop teacher candidates' ability to grow as reflective practitioners.

### *Conclusions*

By participating in coaching conversations with an instructional coach, teacher candidates were able to engage in reflective practices that may not have been achieved alone. With the support and guidance of an instructional coach, the teacher candidates were able to identify noteworthy events, analyze these events to gain new understandings about teaching and learning, and set goals based on the newly acquired knowledge. Teacher educators would benefit by knowing more about the learning that occurs within the directed conversations between the instructional coach and teacher candidate.

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